

An Untold Story about the Feminist Association

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An untold story about the Feminist Association¹

Is there an expression that says: “history is knocking at one’s mailbox?” On 12th October 2004, struggling with the forty e-mails pouring in every day, I found one that came from a certain Pauline and László.

I would like to share this personal story with you, as it renders a gender-sensitive reading of memory and oblivion.

The characters of this story are the women members of three generation: the grandmother, her daughter and her son, and their children.

So: I almost deleted this e-mail, as we live in an era of viruses. But then I still opened it, as there were no suspicious-looking attachments, and I read the following text with widening eyes:

„Dear Professor, you have written a number of books on topics that myself and my husband also do research on” – here follows a long list of my books that have been published in English. My eyes are widening, I am swelling with pride: finally, someone seems to be reading the hundreds of pages I have written. Then comes the question: „Could you tell us how you managed to get documents from the secret police? I think that many documents related to Nazism and communism are hidden from researchers. Do you know who hides them and where? You may have heard about my husband’s grandmother, an early feminist, who took an active part in the Resistance” – I caught my breath at this point – „... her name is Mrs. Meller née Eugénia Miskolczy. My husband is engaged in research to immortalize her courage and her activities, her fight for peace and freedom. Do I need to say that she was a martyr? The Hungarian Nazis beat her to death. We know very little about her, and perhaps You have...” – the sentence was edited at this point, but it was left

¹ The paper was read in Hungarian in the Untold stories Series of the Esther’s Bag Foundation. For history of the photos see Pető, Andrea, “A Photograph” in *Teaching with Memories. European Women’s Histories in International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms*. Eds. Andrea Pető, Berteke Waaldijk, Women’s Studies Centre, University of Galway Press, 2006 pp. 46-50.

unfinished. „We are eager to get your answer, best wishes, Pauline, on László Strasser’s behalf.”

I replied immediately, of course. I like writing letters anyway. I read a lot about Mrs. Meller in the National Archives, while I was writing my book on post Second World War women’s movement in Hungary². The documents of the Feminist Association are there among the organizational materials. What fascinated me in her life story was that she organized feminist gatherings even after the prohibition of public meetings. Then the Hungarian Nazis came and took her, and they either beat her to death or shot her. Reading the letter from her grandson, I have a suspicion: how do we know what had happened to her? When her grandson, or to be more exact, his lately retired, ambitious wife wrote to me, Mrs. Meller suddenly became alive. Sometimes those who make history do not seem completely real to us, who write history. Júlia Rajk³ seems to be living because Laci is present, her values and past are living. But what has remained with us of Mrs. Meller? And of the whole feminist movement? Why don’t we organize Untold Stories sessions with the relatives of the feminists: with Mrs. Szirmai’s granddaughter, or with Lilla Kunvári, the granddaughter of Bella Kunvári, the last secretary of the organization? There is nothing more harmful in the women’s movement than discontinuity. I immediately got down to the keyboard and began to explain that I only dealt with the post-1945 period, but as I had just been asked to write an article about women in the Resistance movement, I had written about Mrs. Meller again. “What has happened to the family archives? Do you have it”, I asked naively.

The answer arrived on that very day, at 2 a.m. according to their time. Pauline is also camping next to her computer, online, like me – the only difference is that she is in Australia. She says that they have a few documents: an article from the journal called *The Hungarian (Magyar)* and a few photos. It seems she has confidence in me. She also describes her earlier experiences in Hungary. She complains about one of the committed researchers of the feminist past in Hungary: she says that she did not believe that her grandmother had been beaten to death by the Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Nazis, and continues this way:

„I still think that for members of the younger generation it is difficult to believe that such cruelties did happen, as they did not live in this period. People do not want to

² Pető, Andrea. *Hungarian Women in Politics 1945-1951*. New York: Columbia University Press, East European Monographs Series. 2003

³ Pető Andrea: *Rajk Júlia*, Budapest, Balassi 2001. Júlia Rajk (1914-1981) wife of Laszlo Rajk, the former Minister of Interior executed in 1949 after a show trial. She became an uncompromisable opponent of stalinism in Hungary supporter of the dissent movement.

remember, they do not want to know about these things. But this is what is going on now, too, in Kosovo, Africa or elsewhere. Just as it happened in Kistarcsa⁴, too.”

Uhm. Do we really have to go through dreadful things to remember them? Is it true that we do not want to remember? I have just got this invitation from Ida, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Feminist Association. What is it if not a will to remember? But to what extent is it possible to create a site of memory (*lieux de memoire*) in spite of the existing frames of memory? This is the major theoretical question of this short story of commemoration.

But Pauline’s letter goes on describing their visit to Budapest, and how they had met the researcher of the period and the topic. Poor Pauline and László struggled enough to get here from Australia, to find the traces of their grandmother now that they had been retired, and the person who had spent years researching this feminist woman and her colleagues regards them only as subjects, and as a scholar, she looks down on them and humiliates them. I am not surprised, of course. We all know the “great progressivists”.

Next day, at noon, Pauline informs me that she has arrived home from photocopying, and she is sending me the material by mail. In this e-mail, which she sent from the middle of Australia, she is pondering on the reasons of Attila József’s death: she thinks that the talented Hungarian poet did not commit suicide. Why is she so interested in Attila József? Oh yes, because Eugénia was in charge of editing the pamphlet written by Attila József and Gyula Illyés⁵, in which they protested against the assassination of the two communist journalists, Imre Sallai and Sándor Fürst in 1932. Why didn’t I know about this? I feel guilty. I check this in a biography of Attila József, but it only mentions Illyés. And there is a quite ugly reproduction of the volume entitled *Medvetánc* in the collection of Attila József’s poems, dedicated to Eugénia. I found out later that this volume is on sale in a second-hand bookshop: it costs 300000 forints.

Nothing happens for a while, only that I am trying to systematize my arguments: why is it that I have always kept away from dealing with the Feminist Association. I have read too many apologetic articles about it; this is the main „Hungarian topic”, a marketable theme on the international women’s studies market; and I have always been bothered by the uncritical jubilation of the illusion of a neglected feminist past.

⁴ Internment camp close to Budapest.

⁵ Attila József (1905-1937) poet and Gyula Illyés (1902-1983) a writer

The letter from Australia arrived finally. It is an odd, quadrangular letter, which is a bit bloated, too. It looks like a strange, square ball, which has not decided whether to go flat fully or not. I am opening it with trembling hands. It turns out that the photocopies had been folded in a way that made their edges curl up. I am arranging the strangely-shaped sheets: a broken, bespectacled, elderly woman is looking at me from the photos. A woman wearing black dresses, who insisted on being photographed in front of her typewriter. Compared to the youthful photo on her admission card to the Palatinus Open-air Pool⁶, the contrast is a better accusation against the Horthy regime than anything else. This woman is incredible, I thought, for the first, but not for the last time: she cut her photo from the publication for the Conference on Women's Suffrage, held in Budapest in 1913, to make an admission card with a photograph to the Palatinus. She must have stored the remaining leaflets at her home, after the time when the Hungarian feminists received the progressive world in the capital for the first and last time. Until when were Jewish people allowed to go to the Palatinus, by the way? It is interesting: Pauline never mentioned that Eugénia was Jewish, and none of the documents she sent refer to this fact either.

Upset by the photos, I sit down to write again: I ask that if that is all what is left of the grandmother's documents, do they have memories of her, recollections of stories and events? On 7th November, Pauline promises to find out everything she can. She would also ask László's sister, Zsuzsa.

I get another e-mail from Pauline that very day. It contains an attachment, an article from 1994, in which someone is worried about the availability of materials concerning Hungarian Jews for researchers. I answer as a rationally thinking, professional researcher is supposed to: I have to see what exactly they want to research to be able to help them. We shouldn't worry just generally until then. Later I regret that I have written this. There they sit in the middle of nowhere, at least that is what Australia seems to me, and for them the archives mean the source of the knowledge they are deprived of. They assume that the archives would be able to answer all of their questions. After all, everything has a written record in the archives, it is just that the documents are hidden. But what is this everything? Is the life a woman engaged in politics – everything? I only suspected it then, but now, when I am writing this, I already know, that this is the Great Dream: the magic of the archives. However, as we shall see from this story, the archives are quite a swindle.

⁶ In Budapest on the Margaret island.

The members of the Meller family liven up reading our letters. Or at least that is what I assume. Anyway, the next series of letters let me know that they are thinking about giving the legacy to the National Library on the occasion of the 100th anniversary. But László refuses the idea, because, as Pauline says, he has vivid memories of how copies of the journal issued by the Association: *Nő és Társadalom* (Woman and Society), were literally reduced to powder in his hands in the Ervin Szabó Library. Well, this much about the memory of the nation. Why haven't we managed to achieve the digitalization of all these materials during the last fifteen years? When there are so distressingly few documents left ...

I still make an attempt at finding something on the Internet. Perhaps the search engine will show something about Mrs. Meller. But I can only find Vilma Glücklich's biography⁷. The Google also finds that in 1918 a delegation of five people visited the seriously ill Endre Ady in his Veres Pálné Street apartment: they presented him with a leather-bound salutation composed by Lajos Hatvany on behalf of the Republic⁸. One of the five members of the delegation (and the only woman) was a certain Mrs. Meller. This is the most certain way to be kept in the memory of the nation: one has to salute men, together with men.

The events accelerate in Australia, too. The Strassers got a letter dated from Budapest on 4th November 2004. It came from Mrs. Jenő Kucsma, an employee of the Red Cross search service in Budapest. This means that it took exactly 7 days for this letter to get to Australia. They even got it from the wrong address it had been sent to, as they had moved recently. To be sure, it takes two weeks for a letter to get from one district of Budapest into another.

But the letter is interesting. Under the reference number 34467/16191 it tells them that Mrs. Artúr Meller survived the war, and was put under the guardianship of an appointed orphanage on 12th October 1945, at 21 Városmajor Street. A strange coincidence, as Mrs. Kucsma probably has no idea of who Mrs. Meller was. It is like the well-known joke about Lenin's Swiss hostess, who was asked about the Russians who had lived in her house in 1916. She said they had moved out all right, and since then she had not heard anything about them.

But I do not leave it at that: I call Mrs. Kucsma. A confident, clever voice answers the phone. The situation is even more odd that I would have thought. The Association of the Hungarian Jewish Religious Communities does not have any answer for the search initiated a year ago. Of course, I remark to myself, they

⁷Vilma Glücklich (1872-1927) one of the founders of the Feminist Association

⁸Endre Ady (1877-1919) poet, Lajos Hatvany (1880-1961) writer

became Lutherans in 1920. It is as if they had died at that time. Then there is Kistarcsa, this is where she sent her last postcard from: but this trace does not lead anywhere either. There is no list of the people imprisoned there, either in the Military Archives or anywhere else. Mrs. Kucsma is reading the documents for me, one after the other. One of them came from the Budapest Municipal Archives. Artúr Meller bought the property in 1917. He died in 1938. At the XII. district Council they recorded on his certificate of ownership that he had been a Jew in 1944. Later, on 13th August 1945, according to the registration, Mrs. Meller applied for a credit for the reconstruction, but this is not authenticated, as it was not she who signed the document. But they recorded the guardianship on 12th October 1945, and Vilmos Meller became Mrs. Meller's guardian. When the house became perilous, in 1948, it was already Vilmos Meller who arranged for the renovation, and he signed the assessment of damage – Mrs. Kucsma is listing the facts. It was not her possessions that were put under guardianship, as it often happened during wartime, until it turned out whether the owner was alive or dead, but it was she herself. "Is it possible that the administrator made a mistake," I ask. Mrs. Kucsma promises that she is going to check this in the documents of the orphanage. And she really means to, I can hear that in her voice. She is making apologies for not knowing Mrs. Meller. But she has heard about Anna Kéthly⁹.

Mrs. Meller got the Silver Liberty Medal on Anna Kéthly's proposal. This was a great distinction, those who got it could even get in to a university in the Hungarian People's Republic without an entrance exam. And it was not given for anything either. According to the Protocol of the National Assembly:

„Mrs. Meller née Eugénia Miskolci is a member of the Executive Board of the Women's World Association for Peace and Freedom, she organized the Left wing civil women's movement which struggled against the war and Nazism, and went on with her activities during the war. After the Nazi occupation the Gestapo carried her off and accused her of maintaining contact with the Russian.”

I am reading an article in the *Magyar*, written by Judit Kovács on the occasion of this distinction. This is what she writes: „she was a thin, agile, tiny, mouse-like old woman with grey hair”. Well, she got it all right. Eugénia became a martyr, and then she is compared to a mouse. Who told this to the journalist? Probably her two unmarried daughters, who had lived with her: they both survived the war. „She always wore grey clothes, and she was a bit hard of hearing. She kept staying at the General Headquarters of the League Against Death Penalty, in the Seemann Café.”

⁹ Anna Kéthly (1881-1976), leader of the Social Democratic Party after 1945, in 1956 a deputy prime minister. She died in exile.

O yes, as the waiter says: the conspirator gentlemen are in the rear room. And what about the conspirator ladies? The article goes on: “They did not talk to her about important things there, as she could only hear things that were told loudly, and there must have been quite a few detectives among the guests.” Poor lady, I think to myself, it is probably only women who go deaf. Then the article reveals why she got the distinction. On the one hand because some members of the Feminist Association recognized the true way in 1919, and they became communists. On the other hand because Mrs. Meller resisted the dissolution, even if the association had very few members by that time. She was a member of two international organizations, and thus she “made it possible for the progressive Hungary to let its voice be heard in the world”. Judit Kovács leaves no doubt about who is progressive in Hungary and who is not. So here comes the Sallai and Fürst story. According to the article, both the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance and the League for Peace and Freedom protested against the Hungarian government’s actions, and it was Mrs. Meller who took care of the list of signatures. When the police of the Horthy regime wanted to arrest her, she tore the list into small pieces and swallowed them. When she was interrogated, she referred to her deafness, saying that she did not remember anyone: „she could not hear their names when they were introduced to her, and she was too ashamed to ask them again, as she had not known any of them before”. That is a very feminine trick. During the second questioning, her civilian courage was not enough any more. Mrs. Meller was beaten up, and then she was taken into a prison hospital in Kistarcsa. This is where she sent that last postcard from, in June 1944. In this she writes (beaten up!): “I teach and learn a lot”.

The red tail is also there in the end of the article: „the Patriotic Popular Front (Hazafias Népfront) can rightly reckon the union created in the spirit of humanism and against fascism by so many well meaning and progressive people in Hungary at that time as a tradition to be fostered”. Well, the Patriotic Popular Front did not seem to need Mrs. Meller’s progressive tradition at all.

I know from the organizational documents kept in the National Archives that the leaders of the association had a fierce debate after 1945 about whether it had been worth to take such a huge risk by disregarding the ban on public meetings.¹⁰ The personal and generational conflicts within the organization made it even weaker. Dr Lilla Wágner, who later wrote a beautiful appreciation of Mrs. Meller on the occasion of her distinction, belonged to the younger generation, and disapproved of the fact that Mrs. Szirmai was appropriating the organization and that in the

¹⁰Request concerning the restarting of the Feminist Association. Hungarian National Archive (MOL) XIX-b-1-h. 5632-732.

accounts sent by her to organizations working in other countries she did not mention either her or Mrs. Meller. She wrote to Mrs. Szirmai:

„Since Mrs. Meller has died, I feel that we ought not forget to mention at least her name, commemorating her courage. I left no stone unturned so that we can do that suitably. I had to draw the conclusion from the consistent silence that it is only Mrs. Meller's death that is becoming institutionalized, and not the things with which she induced it, even if indirectly.”¹¹

It is certain that it was the Feminist Association that took the medal over from Ferenc Nagy. They later sent it to Eugénia's son, Vilmos, with the instruction that in case he leaves no relatives behind, he should not forget to make arrangements so that the medal could get back to the Feminist Association. In case it still exists. The Feminist Association was certainly seized with the hybris of making history on its own.

In the meantime I find out that the other grandchild lives here, in the Pasaréti Street. I call him: a self-confident male voice tells that he knows everything from Australia, and he would be glad to meet me.

I visit András Mellet on 15th November. He was born in 1946, and tells that he has nothing to tell. He does not know stories about his grandmother. He explains sadly that his father, who was a lieutenant artilleryman on the Italian front during the First World War, did not talk to him either about this or about the labor service, although he was curious as an adolescent. But then they did not talk about the painful stories. And they did not talk about his grandmother's activities after 1945 either. His mother and his father met in a house under foreign protection while they were hiding. After the liberation, they kept postponing their marriage until they could, as they were hoping that Mrs. Meller would come back – she was old, but very tough. But she did not come back. Only the Red Cross claimed that, and then they immediately had to put her under guardianship according to the papers. It is awful.

András tells me whatever little he knows. When he was 15, he had to go to an orthodontist, and his mother exhorted him to tell the doctor that he was Mrs. Meller's grandson. The doctor dragged him along the whole clinic, and told everyone that this boy here was Mrs. Meller's grandson! But no one knew who this Mrs. Meller was, and it was a very embarrassing situation, the grandson tells. We

¹¹MOL P 999 1. cs. p. 434.

are looking at the photos in the sitting room, surrounded by the Mellers' biedermeier furniture. He knows who the people are on most family photos, but there are many beautiful women looking at us from the pictures, wearing corsets, whom he does not know. The aesthetization of memory: it is not the story that matters but visual representation. As if history was present, when in fact it is not.

E-mail is a tricky genre: I find out that András gives an account of my visit at 11 that night to the Australian branch of the family. I find it by chance later on the bottom of another, forwarded message. He calls me Dr Pető in this letter, which is funny: the grandson happens to be as old as my mother. He praises my "good questions" in his account, but admits that he could not really answer them. He remarks, a bit reproachfully, that I am only interested in the post-war period. This is true: I am interested in the constructions of memory. He also gives a summary of the questions he could not answer. These are the following: what was Eugénia's relationship to her husband and her children like; and was she more of a politician or a housewife. Well, these are important questions. Who knows the answers if not the grandson? But he tells that his aunt used to enjoy that her mother was waiting for her in a hansom cab after school and took her to the poor outskirts of the city, where she made public speeches.

The family's dog died while I was there. I already regretted having told with my usual directness that I wholeheartedly hated dogs when I entered and they told me proudly that there were two boys in the feminist's family: András and Frici, the dog. Anyway, poor Frici dog died just then, while I was there, so half of the letter is about my visit, and half of it is about the death of the dog. Dr Pető and Frici – but understandably with more enthusiasm about Frici. It gives me some satisfaction that Zsuzsa, László's sister asks in another letter who Frici is, once he plays such a central role in the correspondence. But at least the family members began to talk to one another, even if only about Frici in the first round.

Zsuzsa's letter appeared in my mailbox on 18th November: she is the other grandchild, László's sister, who also lives in Australia. She writes a lot about her grandmother, whom she knew personally. Pauline forwards me this letter, censored, and attaches a long list of errata, rectifying Zsuzsa where they think she is wrong. This is quite deterrent: I am seriously thinking about giving up the whole research. Especially as a week later Pauline forwards me Zsuzsa's original letter by mistake. Well, they must love each other, I think. Do I really need this?

In the meantime I get the official letter of invitation for this conference from Ida. I wouldn't like to give a scholarly-reasoning presentation. I am skeptical: what do we

know and from where? Once I have begun, I am going to finish this story. I am reading the text: Zsuzsa does not know anything about her grandparents' marriage. "People did not know anything about other people's marriages at that time", she writes. She also tells that her parents, who were not as wealthy as the Mellers, always kept a domestic servant and a governess, too. She thinks that her grandmother was rather a "responsible intellectual" than a politician. She has faint memories of her grandmother being a member of the Feminist Association, although she remarks correctly that she has no evidence of this, only a photograph of many unknown women, to whom her grandmother is speaking about something. Well, it was worthwhile to sacrifice one's life for this, I think to myself, but she goes on like this:

„She looked very modest, a low-key person, and I think she was quite cold. At the same time, she rather did things than neglected her children. At that time, many women left brining up their children to others, and spent their time with visiting people and shopping. Eugénia was not like that. She seemed to be wearing similar grey dresses all the time, and she was completely free from vanity. There was no enmity between Eugénia and her children, and they appreciated each other to the necessary extent, although it is true that Laura [her mother] did not like to declare things. And it is true that the children slept in one bedroom, and they did not like being alone.”

The picture she depicts of the grandfather is quite dreadful. He got up in the morning, drank his brandy, went to work, had lunch at home, and then chatted his time away in a café house, had dinner, and went to bed. He was an entrepreneur – while her wife was agitating for social justice as a member of the Social Democratic Party. But they also held the family gatherings in cafés, Zsuzsa says, and then many of them came together, chatted, and there was ice-cream, too. As that is what really matters for a little girl: the ice-cream.

Pauline did not only censor Zsuzsa's letter but wrote more comments on it, too, still on the same day. She thinks that although she did not know Eugénia at all, she could not be cold, but she could only survive that way after losing her sisters and brother.

Interestingly enough, answering the question I asked about their religious affiliations, Zsuzsa only writes about the Sunday school. She does not even mention the fact that they were Jewish. Did they not think about the conversion and its implications at all? Or why they were bored by the music of Bach in the Lutheran church in the Castle? Why was this completely forgotten, silenced?

But oblivion is even more essential, general and structural, and we are also responsible for it. After 1945, the only acceptable frame of memory was the one related to communism. Mrs. Meller got a good point considering the case of Sallai and Fürst, so she had a place in the communist Pantheon, but at the same time she was a social democrat, and a feminist, with a suspicious bourgeois background, and she was even Jewish – and this was too much. Even though she died at the best time, during the Resistance. Those in the family who survived and stayed in Hungary did everything to sustain continuity. During the elections of 1945, almost everyone of the XIIth district list in Budapest of Imre Csécsy's Radical Party was from the Meller family, but later there was no space for them. Questions were not asked, and other considerations determined who could remember and what.

So now I am going to read out what I know now:

Eugénia Miskolczy was born on 14 January 1872. Her father was Adolf Miskolczy, a craftsman born on 12 June 1839 in Hódmezővásárhely. Her mother, Laura Weiss was born on 5 July 1849 in Buda. They got married in 1870, in Buda. Her brother József died in 1876, at the age of 6. Her sister Irén died in 1879, at the age of 5. The fourth child was born in 1879. Laura died of tuberculosis in 1883, when Eugénia was 11. She married Artúr Meller, who worked as an inspector at the National Bank of Hungary, in July 1896. They had four children: Vilmos was born in 1896, Laura in 1898, Erzsébet in 1899 and Rózsa in 1901. The family lived at 49 Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Street (as it is called today).

Eugénia was one of the founders of the Feminist Association in 1904. She was a member of its Political Committee. She published articles in the journal called *Women and Society*. She was a very good public speaker: she held lectures in the Óbuda Democratic Circle, in Szeged and in Transylvania. She was one of the organizers of the 7th Word Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance held in Budapest in 1913. She gave a lecture on women's issues at the Society of Social Sciences (Társadalomtudományi Társaság) in 1915. At the banned feminist conference in 1916, she gave the „undelivered speeches” as a form of resistance to the ban. She was a member of the National Council (Nemzeti Tanács) in 1918, delegated by the feminists. She participated in the Paris Peace Congress in 1926, as a member of the Hungarian delegation. She was a member of the Social Democratic Party. She is the author of the pamphlet protesting against the execution of Imre Sallai and Sándor Fürst in 1932. After the German occupation in 1944, she was arrested, and she disappeared. The President of the Republic honored her with the Silver Liberty Medal in 1946.

Epilogue

In its 27th November 2004 issue the Hungarian daily newspaper of highest daily circulation, *Népszabadság* covered the conference organized by the WomanMate Foundation and the Association of Hungarian Women Internet Users, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Feminist Association. The detailed account emphasizes that there is no women's movement in Hungary today, and even the people who are working at it are unable to formulate the problems in an intelligible way. The article is illustrated by a huge photograph, which shows a moment of my speech. It is exactly the moment when I was trying to explain why I was not dealing with the Feminist Association, and for this part I chose the best known photograph of Róza Bédy Scwimmer: the one that shows her delivering a speech in front of the Parliament. The caption under the photo says: „Andrea Pető is talking about Róza Bédy Schiwmmmer, one of the founders of the Hungarian feminist movement.” Poor Mrs. Meller née Eugénia Miskolczy was again deprived of something that should have been hers. But one thing gives me comfort: the only photo that was left to us of the activity of the Feminist Association between the two world wars depicts Mrs. Meller, and it is very similar to the photo about me in this newspaper. She was lecturing at the City Hall. Anyway, at least in this photo there is behind me, if not Mrs. Meller, then Róza Schwimmer. Perhaps we can go on from here.